

Perceptions of Environmental Sustainability held by students in a NSW Primary School

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for any degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for any other degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Graham Weeks

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This thesis is dedicated to my daughter Katie Alexandra Weeks.

Treat the Earth well. It was not given to you by your parents. It was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children.

Native American Proverbs and Wisdom.

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Perceptions of Environmental Sustainability held by students in a NSW Primary School

Abstract

The study aims to produce an insight into how young children perceive environmental sustainability and poses the research question: What perceptions of environmental sustainability do primary school students, in their final years of primary education, hold and express? Existing research (Phipps, 1991; Spork, 1992; Walker, 1995; Walker, 1997) indicates that the most significant work in environmental education in NSW is being done at the primary school level. However, evidence relating to the research question is limited. Therefore, it is important to gather and analyse data about these perceptions of primary school students if we are to develop and implement sustainability education curricula that best support the needs of students, is relevant to primary school teaching and learning, and provides insight into appropriate strategies for the professional development of teachers.

The study involves students in their final years of primary school education and explores their perceptions of environmental sustainability. It provides insight into how their perceptions are informed and how they may be best nurtured. The data are gathered from primary school students in Years 4, 5 and 6 and their teachers in one NSW primary school. Qualitative methods are used to collect data. These include students responding to three differing types of stimulus material using an

open-ended questionnaire, focus group discussions, and individual interviews. The data are gathered using methodology that is influenced by Grounded Theory and analysed with reference to the existing literature.

The conclusions report that the students in the study most frequently express notions of sustainability that are underpinned by homocentric views of sustainability; proximate cause and effect scenarios; and, proposed actions based on sharing natural resources fairly while maintaining the environmental balance and behaving responsibly. Finally, an emerging framework of primary school students' notions of environmental sustainability is presented and discussed along with the implications for sustainability curricula.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AAEE – Australian Association for Environmental Education.

BOS – (NSW) Board of Studies.

CFCs – Chlorofluorocarbon pollutants.

CO₂ – Carbon Dioxide.

DET – NSW Department of Education and Training.

EE – Environmental Education.

ENSI – Environment and School Initiatives.

ESD – Ecological Sustainable Development, and also Education for Sustainable Development.

GW – Graham Weeks, the principal researcher and author of this thesis.

HREC – Human Research Ethics Committee (at UTS).

HSIE – Human Society and Its Environment (NSW Curriculum for Society and Environmental Education K-6).

IPCC – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

IUCN – International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources.

K-6 – Kindergarten to Year 6 (the range of student groups in NSW DET primary schools. This equates to elementary schools in the United States of America).

K-12 – Kindergarten to Year 12 (the range of student groups in NSW DET primary and secondary schools).

NEP – New Environmental Paradigm.

NSW – New South Wales.

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

SERAP – State Education Research Approval Process (DET, NSW).

SSP – Sustainable Schools Program (DET, NSW).

STS – Science, Technology and Society.

UK – United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland.

UNEP – United Nations Environment Program.

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

UNFCCC – United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

UTS – University of Technology, Sydney.

WWFN – World Wildlife Fund for Nature.

Presentations

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